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THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER.

DECORATIVE COMPOSITION.

Translated from the French of HENRI MAYEUX, Architect to the French Government, and Professor of Decorative Art in the Municipal Schools of Paris

CHAPTE III.—ORNAMENTS APPLIED TO FORM.



UR remarks have been, hitherto, confined to form and decoration, each separately; we will now consider them together, and dwell on some principles governing the production of ornament applied on form.

SECTION I. Symmetry.—Perhaps the most important of these is symmetry; respecting which Mr. Ruskin says, "I only assert that it is necessary to the dignity of every form, and that by the removal of it we shall render the other elements of beauty comparatively ineffectual; though, on the other hand, it is to be observed that it is rather a mode of arrangement of qualities than a quality itself, and will have no power over the mind unless it should possess all the other constituents of beauty. A form may be symmetrical and ugly, as many Elizabethan ornaments, yet not so ugly as it would have been if unsymmetrical."

Symmetry has been largely employed by ornamentalists of all periods and nationalities. Good illustrations are found in the works of Egypt, Assyria, Greece, Rome, those of the Renaissance and of modern times. Symmetry may be *absolute*, or *relative*; it is absolute when a design is composed of devices rigorously similar, disposed inversely on each side of one or more imaginary lines termed *axes*, Fig. 60.

It is relative when it admits of variety in the subordinate parts; such would be a decorative panel, with figures, caryatides, drapery, and pendants of diversified position, in which a just balance of the masses has been regarded, Fig. 64. Obviously the principle of variation, or relative symmetry, Fig. 61, demands more thought and subtler handling than is required in absolute symmetry. This may be developed by substituting for somewhat rigid symmetrical arrangement of strict similarity the free play of fancy agreeable both to the mind and eye, Fig. 62. But undue variation is apt to result in confusion and disorder; thus one side only of a design should not be filled up to the entire exclusion of the other; some appropriate device, however small, should be thrown in to avoid the appearance of incompleteness, Fig. 63.

Chinese and Japanese art is frequently unsymmetrical; lateral balancing of parts, due harmony, and proportion of masses being purposely discarded.* Hence close imitation of Japanese work is not to be recommended; despite great merit both as regard finish of execution and exquisite natural rendering, its faulty composition cannot be overlooked. For instance, flowers, fruit, birds, or figures, are scattered haphazard on forms, without regard to curved surfaces, or edges defining plans, showing an absence of symmetry not compensated for by qualities of make however excellent these may be.

By Japanese art, we do not mean the cheap products which have glutted our markets, and are to be seen in shops and in many private houses, which, though disclosing much productive skill, have little else to recommend them. And if this is true of the green tree, what shall be said of the dead tree; of second and third-rate imitations of Japanese pots and pans; Japanese textile fabrics, redeemed by none of the charm and grace of the originators? True, we tolerate the commonplace productions of the seventeenth century, but that is because we are forced into something like admiration for the consummate knowledge displayed by the artist, in the dexterous handling and just harmony of his composition, qualities conspicuous by their absence in Japanese art.

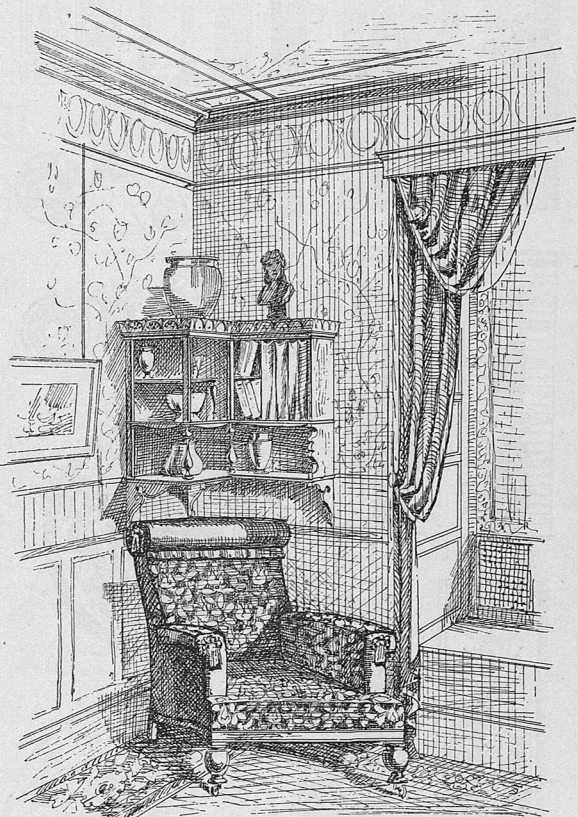
Principle of Simplicity.—Besides symmetrical arrangement as opposed to an irregular or unsymmetrical one, there are other principles which we must now consider; the first of which is simplicity. The principle of simplicity is the chief feature of all early art, and is mainly dependent upon another simple element for its decorative effect, the horizontal line. This is very well seen in Egyptian temples, in Assyrian, Doric, Roman and early Gothic structures of all countries, marked by great simplicity of treatment. Good illustrations are afforded in the cathedrals of Winchester and Salisbury, Westminster Abbey and many other buildings, wherein simple forms and details are conspicuous features. Simplicity of treatment imparts a marked character to the buildings to which it is applied; hence its frequent occurrence when massive importance and dignity are required. Perhaps the best examples of this principle are in Early English work, notably the churches, which at once strike us by reason of their massive and noble proportions.

If the artist adopts simplicity of treatment, he first appor-

* The same may be said of the *rocaille* style of Louis XV, which, though not plastically like Japanese art, is marked by such absence of symmetry, that it would not be tolerated but for the spirit and skill of its execution. Hence the student should first thoroughly master those art productions which are marked by a principle of symmetry; this done, reference to a more erratic style will form a useful and fitting supplement to his knowledge.

tions his design into one or more grand divisional sections which may embrace secondary divisions, sub-divided in their turn by details; but if his choice should fall upon complexity of arrangement, he begins by dividing the whole composition into successive parts, each possessing its particular details. Fig. 65 shows two front bays, each having similar dimensions and each pierced with smaller bays of like character and disposition, affording good examples of these principles.

The principle of complexity is a development of the principle of simplicity. It is met with in the later monumental works of India, Greece and China, in the first period of French and Italian Renaissance, especially in the church of St. Mark at Venice and the Duomo at Milan. In England it is the chief characteristic of Later or Decorated Gothic; Henry VII.'s chapel at Westminster affording a good illustration of complexity of treatment and over-loading of ornament not to be found in earlier works. Monumental bas-reliefs, natural paintings, tapestry, stained glass, flooring or any large surface may receive either treatment. Both principles are good and useful in their different ways, and both may be applied with perfect propriety and fitness according to the nature and the position of the object decorated. It is clear that an object on a level with the eye may be more elaborately ornamented than one viewed from a distance, and the nobler parts of a building receive greater care than those



A CORNER IN THE LIBRARY BY J. P. McHUGH.

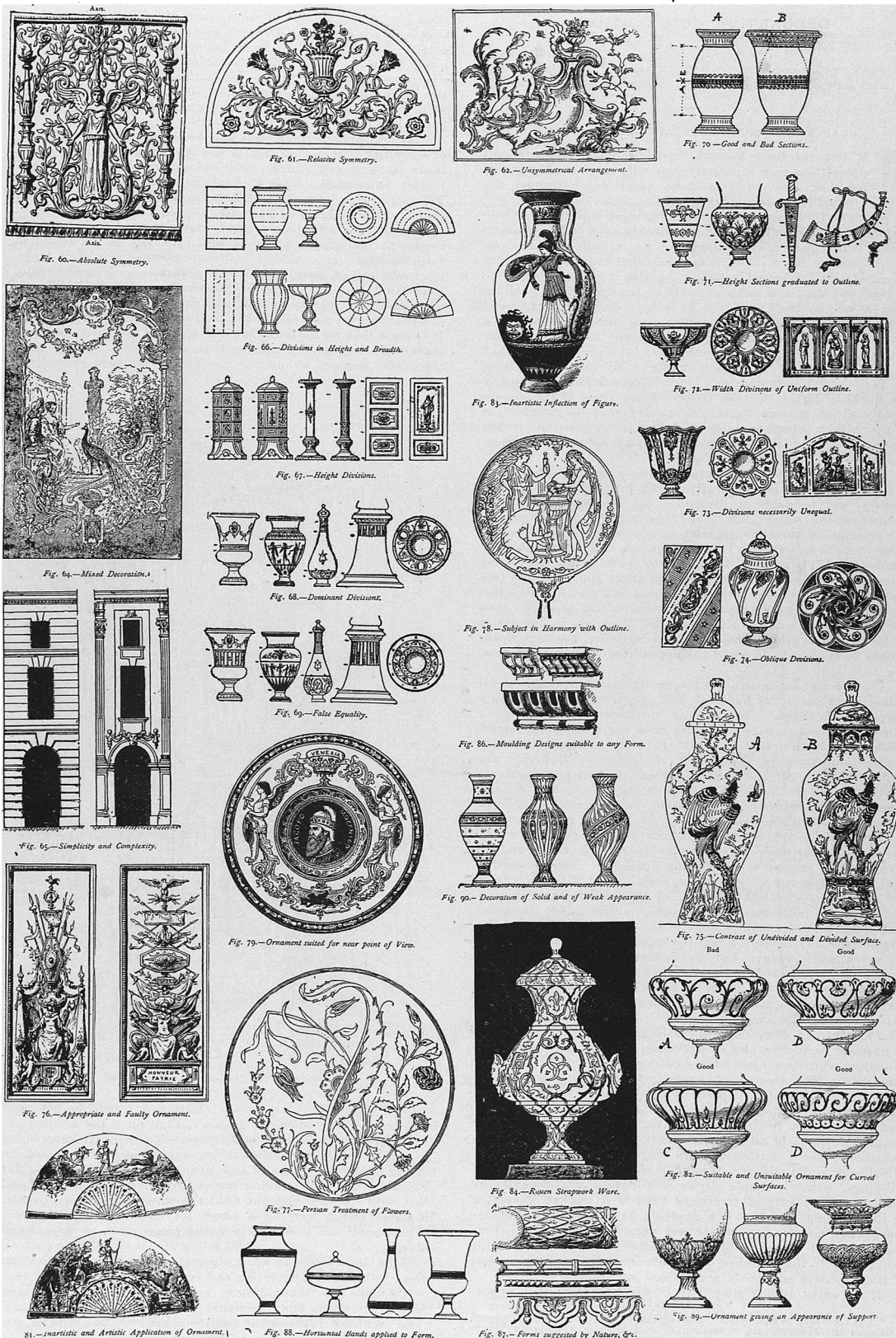
destined for less important uses. More care should be bestowed upon the drawing-room, for instance, than upon the kitchen.

SECTION II. Division of Surfaces.—The general forms being duly considered, these should be divided and ornamented in leading lines on the face of the work, either slightly sunk, flat or in relief; the intervening spaces may then be subdivided and filled with similar ornament until the whole surface is covered. In a rectangular form, in a panel, for instance, such lines will be horizontal and vertical; in round pieces, such as vases, small columns and the like, they will follow the outer edge or pattern, and the bisection will be horizontal and circular; whilst flat pieces will admit of radiating and concentric divisions, Fig. 66.

To make our meaning clear, we will call the intervals dividing the concentric and horizontal sections *height divisions*, and those occurring between the radiating and vertical cuts or sections *width divisions*.

The student, having divided the surface to be decorated into principal sections, must next consider the kind of effect he wishes

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ILLUSTRATIONS TO DECORATIVE COMPOSITION, BY HENRI MAYEUX.

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to produce, and be careful to allow for the relative position of all the members, so as to obtain a clear, well-proportioned and harmonious whole. These principles, as will be observed, are the same which regulate good proportion of form. Hence height divisions should only be applied to symmetrical, pentagonal and round forms, or surfaces with rectangular outlines, each member or section affording a similar development, Fig. 67. But if, on the other hand, we had to deal with outlines bulging out and contracting in turn, or surfaces of circular and diversified contour, then height divisions should be *unequal*, one being treated as the dominant, Fig. 68. In obedience to this principle, it is obvious that equidistant sections would be faulty if applied on irregular forms, a similar repetition, or "repeat," as it is termed, being out of harmony with the inequality of the corresponding outline, Fig. 69.

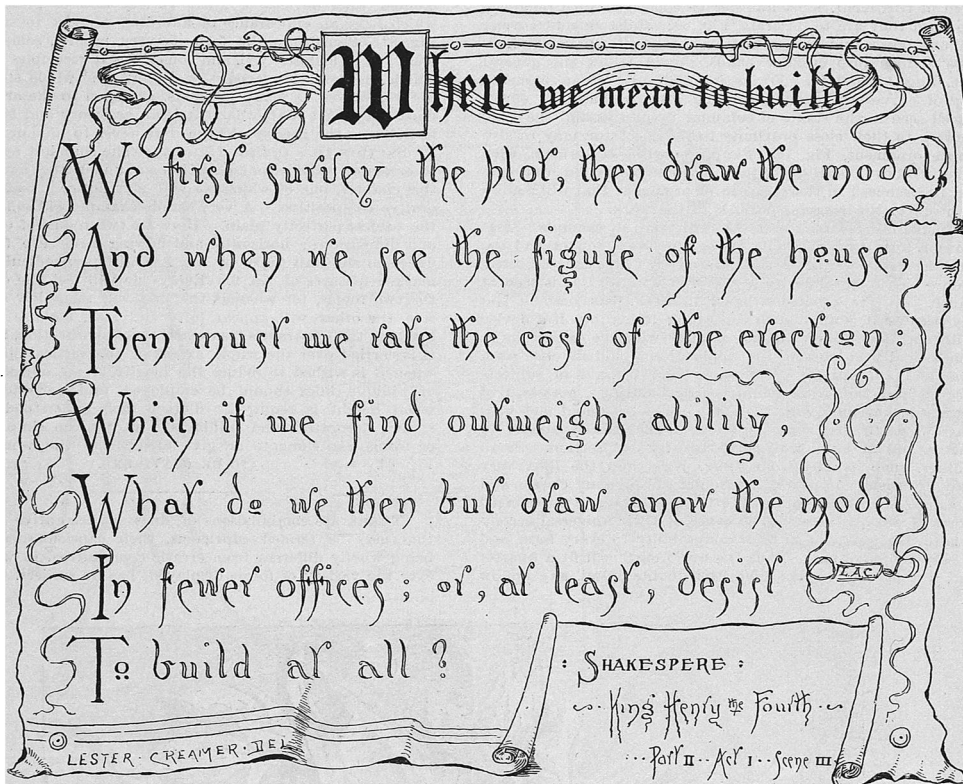
Fig. 70 illustrates the appropriate section of the symmetrical form A, which would be inartistic in form B, bulging out towards the top.

Height divisions may be used in ovoid and conical forms, affording gradual regular contractions, of frequent occurrence in vases, horns, the outlines of sheaths and the like; but care must be taken to follow the scale or gradation of the outline, Fig. 71, whilst width divisions may be associated with forms of continuous outlines or rectangular surfaces, presenting regular or uniform outlines; such an arrangement is seen in circular discs, in panels,

surfaces, be it a band, fillet or any other simple device, well applied on the object, will at once raise its artistic character. This is exemplified in Greek vases, seen in our Fig. 1. As we observed before, the disregard of the Chinese and Japanese for any kind of division which may fairly be considered as symmetrical is carried so far, that their ornaments are scattered broadcast over the whole surface without consideration for plans or outlines. But it cannot be denied that many of their decorative pieces would gain in having some band or divisional section, as may be seen in vase A, corrected in vase B, Fig. 75.

In conclusion we would remind the student that, whether he adopts a symmetrical, unsymmetrical or alternating mode of ornament, he must above all things avoid uncertainty of expression and meaning in the division of surfaces, under penalty of violating the true laws of decoration and marring the effect of the composition.

SECTION III. *Directing Influence.*—Division of surfaces leads naturally up to the principle of order which ought to prevail in decorative art, and the fitness of ornament to its scale and position. Thus square, rectangular or elliptical forms should be differently treated; ornament appropriate to flat surfaces, if applied to ovoid or conical shapes, will lose part of its charm and peculiar character from the mere fact of its misplacement. Hence, it is necessary that the artist should compose and study every decoration in view of one particular form, and one only.



LETTERING FOR DESIGNERS. BY LESTER CREAMER.

and other like forms, wherein each member is but a repetition of the other, Fig. 72.

When surfaces are possessed of different heights, or jagged outlines, width divisions should be *unequal* and follow the variations of form, Fig. 73. In spiral, serpentine or helical forms, presenting circular, flat or raised surfaces, the bisection is horizontal and vertical, and the divisions, although regular, become *oblique* or slanting, and may be treated with great freedom; but care must be taken to make spiral forms converge regularly towards a common center, whilst oblique and twisted forms must be strictly parallel to one another, Fig. 71.

Common sense and the inherent feeling in man of a striving after the beautiful, will be the best counsellors in the selection of appropriate objects not derived from nature, whilst a just apprehension of the fitness of things will prevent errors of judgment in the working out of forms in materials not properly belonging to them. From the foregoing remarks, the student may perceive that ornament which appropriately divides the

If we turn to flat surfaces, such as rectangular panels, wherein the ornament alone is unsymmetrical, we find that the prevailing dimensions should be vertical, and the main lines of the decoration and general arrangement run parallel to the leading outlines of the panel, exemplified in Fig. 76, A showing appropriate ornament, B faulty. The case would be reversed in a panel with horizontal lines, whilst it is self-evident that a *square* panel, having all its sides equal, cannot be governed by any directing influence.

Ornament applied to flat surfaces presenting curved outlines should follow their flow, or, at any rate, not impede it. Thus the main lines of the decoration of a circular or oval piece should be so managed as to avoid awkward crossings of the border line, and, by skilful inflections, glide in a *tangential* or *parallel* direction to the outline, except in cases when they follow naturally a concentric or radiating direction, and sharply cut the border. The Persians, in the floral treatment and compositions of their ceramic vessels, have left models for us to imitate, Fig. 77. Had

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a like balance and harmony of form and ornament marked Japanese work, their art would be almost perfect. The same principle applies, though in a less degree, to human and animal forms, but as they cannot be subjected to the same modifications as floral ornaments, they will require thoughtful care when introduced in narrow fields, in order to avoid ungraceful postures or encroachment upon boundaries. Many examples of mediæval work exhibit figures tortured into painful positions from want of consideration to ways and means. The Greeks themselves have not always adhered to this golden rule, notably in their religious vessels, wherein the appearance of figures extending over the deeply inflected curve of the neck of the vessel, is not proper to the human form, Fig. 83. This error of judgment was reproduced by ceramists during the Italian and French Renaissance, especially the schools of Urbino and Nevers. Nevertheless, no one viewing Fig. 84, a fine specimen of Rouen strapwork ware, in which the principle of the fitness of ornament to the form is strictly kept in view, will fail to perceive the superiority of the Urbino example, marked by inimitable grace, subtlety of color, purity and richness of design. It is a marvel of ceramic art, which, though faulty in construction, may well be held up for our admiration, but which should not be rashly imitated by the novice, lest his efforts should result in woeful disaster. The old Italian medallion, Fig. 78, is a good illustration of a subject kept strictly in harmony with the outline.

Rustic and picturesque objects, though admitting of greater freedom of treatment, must likewise be conceived with reference to the form they are to decorate, Fig. 80; whilst shields, covers, medallions, bosses and fans, in fact every form of ornament which may be divided into circular bands, should follow the general outline, Figs. 63 and 81. Forms in relief present an immense variety of curves and scrolls, yielding great richness of effect, very well seen in the shafts of columns, in plinths and the like, and, owing to their close proximity to the spectator, may receive elaborate ornament, Fig. 79. Simple curvilinear surfaces, with concave or convex outlines, admit of rich decoration, but care should be exercised in the selection of ornament that will readily adapt itself to the irregular outlines of the work.

To make our meaning clear we will take an example. Fig. 82 shows a form with a double curve, the lower convex and the upper concave answering to the *cyma reversa* of classic architecture, on which a spiral device A has been applied. It is seen at a glance that the ornament, good in itself, has become bad simply because it is applied to the wrong form; but if a device affording in its outline a distinct analogy with the outline, as in section B, had been chosen, the application would at once seem natural and appropriate. The same may be said of subjects applied to a section with leading vertical outlines, possessed of inflections in harmony with the form. The ornament met with in narrow partitions, such as fillets, is necessarily simple in character, and affords hardly any scope for bad section. Small mouldings, such as the *ovolo*, bead, jewel and the like, very delicate in their curvature, are found throughout classic and Renaissance art, whilst minute patterns are largely introduced in scores of antique vases. The cause of their universal acceptance is to be sought for in their adaptability to every form, and their easy reproduction. Thus the *ovolo* (egg) will fit a quarter round; the *ogee*, the *cyma recta*, the double spiral, any hollow

groove, *civetto* or otherwise; whilst the outlines of anti-spirals will suit flat cornices, Fig. 85; and sectional mouldings, such as the billet, the cable, bead, plait, chasing, etc., will fit every form, Fig. 86.

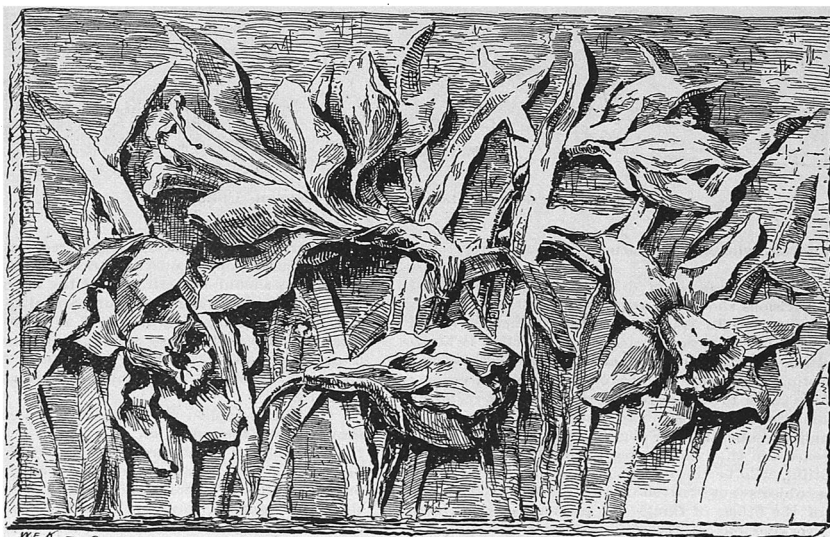
Objects observed in nature, such as the peculiar habits and the dress of foreign people, etc., are sometimes introduced into decoration, and are always well received because they are easily understood and appeal to the sense of observation in the beholder; such as floral, fruit and verdure wreaths; stems tied into fasciæ; plaits, olive berries, pendants simulating looped-up drapery and the like, Fig. 87, whilst leaves, owing to their natural grace and richness of outline, have been largely employed from the earliest times. The Egyptians with true instinct chose, not strange plants they knew nothing about, but the *acanthus*, the lotus, papyrus and the other native plants of free growth always to be found on the banks of the Nile. Laurel, oak and parsley leaves, on the other hand, are of frequent occurrence in all classic and modern art, whether on architecture, ceramic, wood or metal work.

Bands are introduced on vessels in order to avoid undue redundancy of form, and to invest them at the same time with an appearance of solidity. This important principle was never absent from the Greek or Etruscan artist's mind, and is also well remembered in most work of our own days. It need hardly be said that their application on retreating forms would be most incongruous. The lower portions of objects, too, are often ornamented with devices of great variety and of pleasing effects, which have an appearance of affording support to such objects, Fig. 89. Sometimes the form is very minute, sometimes it is merely a reticulated veil, and sometimes it resembles a basket in which the vessel is placed. In a word, the whole storehouse of nature, as well as man's products, are open to the artist, but he must not forget that ornament is an accessory and is to be used to enhance the beauty of form, but never to hide or stultify it.

SECTION IV. *Optical Illusions*.—The soundest eye is subject to errors of vision, commonly known under the name heading this chapter, one of which we will now notice as affecting decorative composition. A very simple example will suffice to make the subject perfectly plain. Here are two rooms of equal height and dimensions; horizontal and flowing forms are freely introduced in the wall paper of No. 1, whilst perpendicular lines are marked features of No. 2. Every one will feel the difference of the two rooms, for whereas the first will seem low and oppressive, the other will appear lofty and airy, because in the first instance the eye travels from each successive section, in the latter it is carried over the whole extent of the vertical line. Hence, when it is wished to reduce the height of an object, horizontal or oblique lines should be employed, and perpendicular lines when height is required. This is well understood by upholsterers, decorators and milliners, who, by the simple exchange of forms, can elongate or give breadth to the work in hand, Fig. 65.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

THERE are combinations of lines in decorative composition that may be termed capricious, their capriciousness, however, being wholly different from erratic composition, in which, whatever the variety of forms displayed, has no subject.



JONQUILS, BY E. A. HALSTED.